

Multimedia

Review of *Have Dog Will Travel*

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Have Dog, Will Travel: A Poet's Journey

Stephen Kuusisto

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Abstract: A book review of *Have Dog Will Travel*, a memoir about a poet's relationship with his Guide Dog.

Keywords: Guide Dog; blindness; memoir

Before reading the poet Stephen Kuusisto's (2018) memoir *Have Dog, Will Travel: A Poet's Journey*, I'll admit to having conceived of guide dogs as a purely pragmatic accommodation, along the lines of a calculator helping you solve math problems. But Kuusisto eloquently captures the experience of walking with his guide dog, Corky: "It doesn't feel like driving a car. It's not like running. Sometimes I think it's a bit like swimming. A really long swim when you're buoyant and fast. There's no one else in the pool" (p.3).

Although Kuusisto was born legally blind, he spent the first of his nearly four decades making do with his limited vision. But at age thirty-eight, after being laid off from a job in academia, the author applied to Guiding Eyes for the Blind and was matched with a guide dog named Corky, which afforded him "spontaneity" (p. 140) in both mundane and transcendent ways. In his dogless days, for example, he struggled to travel almost anywhere alone, whereas afterward he and his "unflappable" dog can go anywhere—even "fantastic ghastly place[s]" like Milan with its "jagged paving bricks, broken sidewalks and Vespas like runaway donkeys" (p.2–3). But he suggests that the more ordinary endeavors, like "doing what other people did when they couldn't sleep," namely wandering the aisles of the 24-hour Walgreens (p.187), may be equally freeing.

The journey to guide dog-guided liberation did not, however, come without setbacks. But to understand these setbacks, one has to delve a bit into Kuusisto's childhood. It all began with his birth three months early, alongside an identical twin brother who did not survive. For Stephen, the primary long-term medical consequence of his early arrival was a visual impairment caused by retinopathy of prematurity. Stephen's younger sister Carol completed the family, which was in equal measures successful and dysfunctional. His "ascetic" father was an academic who took the family to Helsinki where he was studying the Cold War and who later became president of Hobart and William Smith, a small liberal arts college in upstate New York (where I myself am now employed as an assistant professor of education),

while his “sorrowful” mother was consigned to a life of “postwar domesticity,” (p.31) and was often “passed out on the sofa with the shades drawn” (p.120). Arguably the most damaging aspect of Kuusisto’s upbringing was how his parents instilled in him the idea that “disabled kids were victims of a nearly unimaginable fate, a predatory darkness” (p.7). So as a child, Stephen did everything in his power to feign normalcy (read: sightedness).

Kuusisto moved past this internalized ableism, not only tolerating, but eventually embracing the accoutrements of his visual impairment. First there was the white cane, then Corky—until “there was no pretending. No grasping for admission to normal-land” (p.23). Despite achieving this personal serenity, Kuusisto still had to deal with unenlightened others: “Doe-eyed holy-roller types—people who’d grown up watching the Jerry Lewis telethons, who’d absorbed a thousand sermons about the blind, who need the grace of God—wanting to touch us, pray for us, at the very least, tell us how uplifting we were” (p.160) In response to this kind of idolatry, Stephen wondered “Can’t a blind person just be customary?” (p.74).

But the prevailing storyline in the memoir is the unexpected intimacy that Kuusisto develops with Corky, and the ways that relationship contributes to his understanding of himself and his perception of disability. For Kuusisto, the experience of walking with Corky is so intoxicating that he sometimes wonders whether it can really last. “Does that feeling stick? Will I always feel like I’m flying?” (p.71). Ultimately he concludes that the contentment is something subtler but more enduring: “[Corky would] rise from her bed and bring me my Nikes. Shoes first, then a glorious day. Always the dog’s suggestion”(p.234).

The memoir is subtle too. Brief but sublime. It traces the arc of a person who at first tries to deny his disability but gradually comes to understand that assistance from a guide dog doesn’t discount his “indomitable” former self who had tried to fight through a fully sighted world without help. As he puts it: “A life of feigned sight hadn’t been wasted. I’d learned to listen while stumbling around. It took boldness to travel without help. And now, with fine-tuning, I was a quicker more refined man of the street” (p.125).

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